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SUBJECT: LULA IN AFRICA

1. (U) Summary: Brazilian President Lula da Silva visited the African countries of Sao Tome and Principe, Gabon, and Cape Verde, July 26-29. The principal rationale for the trip was to attend a summit meeting of Portuguese speaking countries (Comunidades dos Países de Língua Portuguesa -- CPLP) in Sao Tome and Principe. Lula also made a stop in Libreville, where he shared with Gabonese President Omar Bonga a 20 minute ride in a silver Rolls Royce before a throng of 3,000 people. In Cape Verde, the President sought to highlight Brazil's long-standing social and economic ties and assistance programs with the island. Although Lula intended to project Brazil's solidarity with Africa, the fact that Brazil's total annual commerce with the three countries visited totals only about USD 30 million perhaps underscores the trip's marginal significance. End summary.

2. (SBU) Ministry of Foreign Relations (MRE) Africa Division Chief Joao Padilha told poloffs on August 2 that, as current head of the CPLP (Brazil had hosted the last summit meeting in Brasilia), President Lula had to go to Sao Tome and Principe, even though he had already visited the tiny island country during a previous Africa trip. This time, Lula brought a senior Petrobras official and promised the assistance of Brazilian government energy regulators to address GOSTP interest in possible deepwater petroleum exploration. The GOB also donated the equivalent of an internet cafe worth of computers; Padilha wryly doubted, however, that Brazil had included a power generator in the package.

3. (SBU) Lula's stop in Gabon had nominally stronger political and economic motives. Lula continued to press Brazil's long-standing case for UNSC reform -- and a permanent Security Council seat for Brazil -- to the country that will preside over the next UNGA. According to Padilha, the GOB perceives Gabon as an influential regional player in Central/West Africa, particularly as a conflict mediator. However, when asked about press reports that cited agreement on international trade matters such as the WTO, Padilha dismissed the reports, affirming that there was no common ground between Brazil and Gabon for serious discussion. The GOB's effort to promote investment in Gabon apparently fell flat as well. Reportedly, only 10 businessmen escorted the President to Africa -- versus the hundreds who went to China in May. The only sector where significant commercial collaboration was possible, Padilha believed, is petroleum, but Petrobras, he lamented, was entering the oil game late in Gabon.

4. (SBU) In Cape Verde, Lula again announced, with much fanfare, that Brazil would provide debt relief -- he had promised similar largesse in his earlier stops. (Comment: Some Brazilian commentators noted that the debt was uncollectible in any case. End comment.) He also pledged to make life easier for Cape Verdians who traveled to Brazil. Unfortunately for the President, getting out of Cape Verde was more difficult than getting in, as his 47-year old Boeing 707 (affectionately known as the 'sucatao', or 'piece of junk') suffered mechanical problems. An air force plane eventually rescued the President.

5. (SBU) Meanwhile, some Brazilian pundits roundly criticized Lula's most recent Africa foray, citing the irrelevance of the countries visited and ridiculing the President for promoting democracy and poverty eradication at the CPLP, then taking a Rolls Royce ride with a corrupt "dictator" in Gabon. Popular columnist Diogo Mainardi in Veja, Brazil's version of Time magazine, acidly juxtaposed the Gabon spectacle with the President's failure to condemn, while on African soil, the genocide in Sudan. (Comment: Concurrent with Lula's trip to Africa, Brazil did support the UNSC Darfur resolution. End comment.)

6. (SBU) Comment: While Lula's most recent trip to Africa can be deemed neither clearly a success nor a failure, it was only marginally significant politically and even less so commercially. The trip could have been an opportunity to further Brazil's South-South agenda and display Brazil as a leader and empathizer for the developing world. But, Lula's latest travels may have been an opportunity lost for want of a substantive and coherent agenda and the President's continued penchant for unintentionally leaving in his wake inappropriate statements and images.

